



Art Deco Architecture across Canada:
Stories of the country’s buildings between the two World Wars
Tim Morawetz

HiGlue Inc., 320pp, \$69.95

This new book on Canadian ‘Art Deco’ buildings documents some of the best inter-war (and immediately post-war) buildings across this vast country. It is very readable, with good quality contemporary and period photographs, but the word ‘stories’ in the subtitle indicates that it is not an architectural history or a gazetteer. It is also very much a selection from the buildings that could be included. It includes a few demolished buildings, but most are still standing, if sometimes quite altered. They are divided by type, with sections on service stations, cinemas and ‘Dominion’ or federal buildings such as post offices, largely built under the Canadian equivalent of the US New Deal.

With examples in all ten provinces, this title supplements Morawetz’s earlier book *Art Deco Architecture in Toronto* (2009) and also Sandra Cohen-Rose’s *Northern Deco* (1996) dealing with Montreal – architecturally the most rewarding large 20th century Canadian city in my view. It provides a counterpoint to the Society’s recent journal *The Architecture of Public Service*, as it contains many public buildings such as libraries, fire and police stations, markets and indoor baths, and highlights the challenges of finding new uses for these buildings that we also face in this country.

There are some drawbacks in defining buildings as ‘Art Deco’ on the basis of

their external surface decoration, such as zigzags, or for their streamlining or vertical window strips, though it does mean that one is not unduly bound by dates. In fact there are very few pre-1929 buildings here, and beaux-arts classical buildings without Deco features (as opposed to ‘stripped classical’, which the book considers acceptably ‘Deco’) are omitted. This is important, as many Francophone Canadian architects studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, including probably the finest, Ernest Cormier, whose Supreme Court in Ottawa (which is in the book) is a real masterpiece. However, it does allow the inclusion of some immediately post-war examples. Commercial and entertainment buildings generally best fit the book’s ‘Art Deco’ parameters, particularly Eaton’s department stores in Toronto and Montreal.

One of the best buildings in the book is Runnymede Public library in Toronto, where public library provision started in 1882 with ten libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie. This is a really suave building by John M Lyle, the leading architect of inter-war Toronto, built in 1929-30 and incorporating a variety of typically Canadian motifs from First

Nation culture and early French settlement. The author’s need to justify its inclusion as ‘its overall form is not Art Deco’ shows the drawbacks of the book’s approach. The Library was renovated in 2005, without detracting from its character according to Morawetz, but it’s clear that other buildings in the book have fared less well. As in the US, it’s clear that heritage protection is fragmented at provincial and municipal levels, but some background on this issue would have been helpful.

Defining buildings as ‘Art Deco’ (or not) often means that places of worship are omitted, or at least neglected. The book does, however, contain some of Canada’s most notable inter-war religious buildings, such as St James’s Anglican Church in Vancouver by Adrian Gilbert Scott (1935-37), one of his best buildings, and St Benoît-du-Lac Abbey in Québec province by the great Benedictine monk-architect Dom Bellot, built in 1939-41 – he died here in 1944 as he could not return to Europe because of WWII. Despite the question of definition referred to above, this is a really good introduction to inter-war Canadian architecture.

- Robert Drake

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Derek Tsang

With President Trump wanting to build a wall, this book and the exhibition it accompanied are a timely reminder of the rich cultural interchange between California (in particular) and Mexico. The exhibition, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), was part of the Getty Foundation’s Pacific Standard Time LA/LA programme, in which over 70 cultural institutions explored Latin American and Latino Art.

In such an outpouring of cultural and artistic expression, yet another book and exhibition might have got lost, but LACMA is a very large venue, and this book an excellent investigation of the architecture and design that binds these two countries (and, in many ways, one culture) together. The cover (shown right) teases our interpretation by superimposing Francisco Artigas and Fernando Luna’s house in Luis Barragán’s Jardines del Pedregal, Mexico City (1966), across Lance Wyman and Jan Stornfelt’s Sun Stone design for the 1968 Mexico Olympics. The former, if it were not for the strutting peacock, might well be in Los Angeles, while the latter, apparently so Aztec, turns out to comprise tiny icons depicting sporting events and the dove of peace, thus demonstrating the international and cohesive aspirations of the XIX Olympiad.

With twelve chapters,16 shorter pieces, and an excellent introduction by Wendy Kaplan, the book is divided into four sections: Spanish Colonial Inspiration; Pre-Hispanic Revivals; Folk Art and Craft Traditions; and Modernism. Except for the last, the transfer of ideas and inspiration might at first seem to be one-way: from Mexico, where there was a long-established cultural heritage, to California, where there was, until the beginning of the C20, comparatively little. But this was not the case.

The story begins with the Panama-Pacific International Exposition held in San Diego and San Francisco in 1915, to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal. In contrast to San Francisco, the San Diego promoters sought to showcase Southern California through the use of the Mission Revival style recently adopted and simplified in a proto-modernist way by local architect Irving Gill. But it was Boston architect Bertram Goodhue whose florid Churrigueresque (ie Spanish Baroque) won the day and prompted Frank Miller, owner of the eponymously-styled Mission Inn in Riverside, to comment that ‘Goodhue’s work at San Diego will be felt for generations to come in every town and village of California.’ How right he was. And so it was in Mexico where what became known pejoratively as Colonial californiano brought California’s Mission Style architecture ‘back’ to Mexico. But it was not Mexican, as Francisco Serrano’s Pasaje Polanco (1931) and later Iglesias House (1934), both in Mexico City, demonstrate: neither red roof tiles nor



Found in Translation:
Design in California and
Mexico 1915-1985
ed Wendy Kaplan

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round towers had been used in colonial times. Now, in post-revolutionary Mexico (the civil war that followed the 1910-11 revolution lasted until 1920), this was seen as American and so rejected by modernist Mexican architects, not so much on grounds of style as of nationalism.

Pre-Hispanic (Aztec and Mayan) revivals offered the opportunity to construct a purely ‘American’ and specifically regional identity. Although employed, complete with serpent columns from Chichén Itzá, by the Mexican government in Manuel Amábilis’s Mexican Pavilion at the Exposición Iberoamericana in Seville, Spain (1928-29), it was Frank Lloyd Wright who most famously adopted the style in his Los Angeles houses of the 1920s. He first introduced it at the Barnsdall ‘Hollyhock’ House (1921) but it was in the concrete-block houses of 1923-24 (Storer, Millard, Freeman and Ennis) that he developed it (as shown in his 1954 book, *The Natural House*) as an innovative but ultimately unreliable construction method. Yet these houses had about as much to do with pre-Hispanic architecture as his contemporaneous and not dissimilar Imperial Hotel in Tokyo (1923) and Yamamura House in Ashiya (1924) had to do with Japanese architecture. More authentic – if authentic is the right word – was the work of the British-born and trained Robert Stacy-Judd, whose Mayan-style buildings such as the Aztec Hotel in Monrovia (1924) and the Masonic Temple in Van Nuys (1951) promoted the style until long after its best-by date.

In the section on Folk Art and Craft, the writers introduce the architectural journalist Esther McCoy as a champion of Mexican design, an epithet that could equally well

be applied to Charles and Ray Eames. Their interest in folk art was central to their film *Day of the Dead*. Made in 1957 for the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the film took its title from the three-day religious holiday (31 October to 2 November) that combines both pre-Columbian and Spanish Catholic traditions. Shot in close-ups both still and moving, it was an introduction to Mexican folk art, such as the Eameses themselves collected, as well as a way of explaining the holiday’s spiritual meaning: ‘Tears are shed for the living,’ a voice on the soundtrack says, ‘we never shed tears for the dead.’

Esther McCoy returns in the final section, Modernism. Her work as a journalist and critic was frequently published in editor/owner John Entenza’s highly influential *Arts & Architecture*, a magazine that was ‘flat as a tortilla and sleek as a Bugatti’, and which embraced Pan-American modernism. Described here as its ‘star correspondent’, McCoy was, from the early 1950s, central to the promulgation of modern Mexican architecture north of the border – and vice versa. The dialogue was now flowing two ways: in Mexico, the magazines *Espacios* and *Arquitectura/México* were showing the work of the California modernists, such as Richard Neutra, whose Kaufmann House in Palm Springs (1946) was published in *Arquitectura/México* in February 1950, while, eighteen months later, *Arts & Architecture* featured Luis Barragán’s own house in Tacubaya, Mexico City (1948), on the front cover. The same issue contained McCoy’s essay, ‘Architecture in Mexico’, as well as transcriptions of her interviews with Barragán, Juan O’Gorman, Max Cetto and others, all uncredited, but the result of a year spent in the country. After the ideas came the architects themselves: Artigas moved to California, building the ‘Hilltop House’ for Newton Bass in Apple Valley (1958), but was unable to establish a foothold. Barragán came later and was more successful, designing houses for Francis Ford Coppola in Napa Valley (1983) and sub-divisions in Fresno (1984) and Palm Desert (1985). In his wake and in his style came Ricardo Legoretta, designing the Montalbán House in Los Angeles (1985). Meanwhile, John Lautner had gone south to Acapulco to build the Marbrisa House (1973).

Trump’s ‘war’ on Mexican migration might threaten the continuation of such rich cultural interchange, but not for the first time. The forced repatriation, due to the Great Depression, of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Mexicans, about 60 percent of whom were birthright US citizens, did not dampen the interest in Mexico which Walt Disney’s contribution to President Franklin D Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy of 1933 did much to continue. This book, in its small way, might do the same.

- Neil Jackson